

Message Text

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PAGE 01 PHNOM 02143 050401Z

63

ACTION EA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-03 H-01 INR-07 L-02

NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 RSC-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15

USIA-06 AID-05 DPW-01 MC-01 ACDA-05 EB-07 AGR-05

OMB-01 TRSE-00 /080 W

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R 040920Z FEB 75

FM AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9201

INFO AMEMBASSY SAIGON

CINCPAC HONOLULU HI

COMUSSAG NKP THAI

C O N F I D E N T I A L PHNOM PENH 2143

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: MOPS, EAID, CB

SUBJECT: THE MEKONG SHIP GRAVEYARD--WHAT NEXT?

1. SUMMARY: THIS MESSAGE SURVEYS THE HEAVY LOSSES RECEIVED BY THE FIRST THREE MEKONG CONVOYS SINCE THE PRESENT KC DRY SEASON OFFENSIVE BEGAN, AND IN PARTICULAR BY THE DOWNSTREAM CONVOY OF FEBRUARY 2-3, AGAINST WHICH THE ENEMY HAS FINALLY BEGUN THE EMPLOYMENT OF MINES. A SAIGON MEETING SCHEDULED FOR FEBRUARY 5 WILL ADDRESS THE CONVOY PROBLEM, TO WHICH A SOLUTION MUST BE FOUND. END SUMMARY.

2. SINCE THE START OF THE KC DRY SEASON OFFENSIVE ON JANUARY 1, THREE UPSTREAM AND TWO DOWNSTREAM MEKONG CONVOYS HAVE BEEN ATTEMPTED. THE FIRST, TP-111, ARRIVED JANUARY 23 WITH TWO AMMO BARGES BRINGING 1,669 SHORT TONS OF AMMO. THE SECOND, T-112, ARRIVED JANUARY 26 WITH TWO AMMO BARGES CONTAINING 2,298 SHORT TONS OF AMMO, AND TWO POL TANKERS CONTAINING 3,000 SHORT TONS OF POL PRODUCTS. THE THIRD AND LAST UP-RIVER CONVOY TO DATE, TP-113, ARRIVED JANUARY 30, WITH A NET DELIVERY, AFTER SHIP LOSSES ENROUTE, CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 PHNOM 02143 050401Z

OF 2,400 SHORT TONS OF POL, 6,750 METRIC TONS OF RICE,

AND 2,631 SHORT TONS OF AMMO.

3. THUS THE TOTAL TONNAGES LAID DOWN IN PHNOM PENH BY ALL THREE JANUARY CONVOYS AMOUNT TO 6,598 TONS OF AMMO, 6,750 TONS OF RICE, AND 5,800 TONS OF POL.

4. THE SHIPPING CASUALTIES HAVE BEEN HIGH, ALTHOUGH FORTUNATELY LESS SO IN PERSONNEL. ON CONVOY PT-112 DOWNSTREAM THE CARGO VESSEL (RICE) PORT SUN I WAS LOST. ON CONVOY TP-113 UPSTREAM THE TWO POL TANKERS HON SEUNG 2 AND HON SEUNG 7 WERE LOST, TOGETHER WITH THE RICE-CARRYING COASTER WAH AN. AND FINALLY, ON "BLACK MONDAY", FEBRUARY 3, DOWN-RIVER CONVOY PT-113 LOST THREE TUGS (TIMBERJACK, HAWKEYE AND BUCKEYE) WITH THEIR SIX SHIELD BARGES, AND THE POL TANKER BAYON TRADER. IN ADDITION THREE OTHER MISCELLANEOUS BARGES AND JUNKS WERE BEACHED, ALONG WITH THE SELF-PROPELLED BARGE SAIGON 120. TWO MORE SHIELD BARGES HAD BEEN SUNK OR LOST ON THE EARLIER CONVOYS, BRINGING THE LOST SHIELD BARGE TOTAL TO EIGHT. A NUMBER OF OTHER VESSELS HAVE BEEN DAMAGED BUT RECOVERED. THERE HAD BEEN NO PERSONNEL LOSSES PRIOR TO PT-113 DOWNSTREAM; WE KNOW THERE HAVE BEEN AS MANY AS SEVEN WOUNDED IN THE LOSS OF THE THREE TUGS FROM PT-113, BUT DO NOT HAVE COMPLETE DETAILS AS YET.

5. PRELIMINARY REPORTS ON THE DISASTROUS PASSAGE OF PT-113 INDICATE THE ENEMY IS AT LAST USING COMMAND DETONATED MINES IN THE VICINITY OF THE NARROW CHOKE POINT FORMED BETWEEN PEAM REANG ISLAND AND THE WEST BANK, AND THAT THESE WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR MOST OF THE SEVERE LOSSES SUFFERED BY THIS CONVOY. A NEW AND ESCALATING ELEMENT HAS THEREFORE BEEN INTRODUCED INTO KC EFFORTS ON THE LOWER MEKONG.

6. THE NEXT UPSTREAM CONVOY, TP-114, IS TENTATIVELY SCHEDULED TO CROSS THE BORDER THD MORNING OF FEBRUARY 5. PRELIMINARY INFORMATION INDICATES THAT CREWS ON RICE AND POL VESSELS HAVE REFUSED TO SAIL, AND THAT THIS CONVOY IS LIKELY TO CONSIST ONLY OF TWO AMMO BARGES, CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 03 PHNOM 02143 050401Z

AS DID TP-111.

7. A MAJOR MEETING IS TO BE HELD IN SAIGON ON FEB. 5, BRINGING TOGETHER A WIDE SELECTION OF PEOPLE FROM WASHINGTON, HONOLULU, USSAG, AID, AND MEDTC TO DISCUSS BASIC CONVOY PROBLEMS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS.

8. MEANWHILE, WE ARE ADVISED FROM SAIGON (SAIGON 1279)

OF PROBLEMS ON WAR RISK INSURANCE FOR AID CHARTERED VESSELS AND BARGES. PREMIUMS HAVE BEEN INCREASED FROM 6 TO 8.6 PERCENT PER VOYAGE IN TUGS AND BARGES EFFECTIVE FEBRUARY 1, AND LLOYDS IS NOW ATTEMPTING TO CANCEL ALL POLICIES FOR UPRIVER TRANSIT TO PHNOM PENH. CLEARLY, NO NEW INSURANCE IS AVAILABLE FOR ADDITIONAL TRANSIT ASSETS. ALTERNATIVES POSED ARE VERY COSTLY; AID-FINANCED INDEMNITIES TO OWNERS; POOLING UNDER A U.S. MILITARY UMBRELLA CONTRACT, WHICH WOULD ALSO PROBABLY REQUIRE AID INDEMNITY; OR OUTRIGHT PURCHASE BY AID OF TUGS AND BARGES. AID/WASHINGTON HAS BEEN ASKED FOR ADVICE ON THIS PROBLEM.

9. COMMENT: SOME BREAKTHROUGH MUST BE MADE IF PHNOM PENH IS TO CONTINUE TO BE SUPPLIED VIA THE MEKONG ROUTE. THE SUPPLY OF ALL THREE CRITICAL COMMODITIES--AMMO, RICE AND POL--MUST BE ASSURED AT A ROUTINE RATE FAR GREATER THAN ANYTHING THAT HAS SO FAR PROVED POSSIBLE SINCE JANUARY 1. THE URGENCY OF THIS PROBLEM CAN HARDLY BE OVERSTATED IN TERMS OF EVEN THE SHORT TERM SURVIVAL OF THE KHMER REPUBLIC.
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